

## IV. VARIÉTÉS

---

### «The Picture in my Memory»

By Father "GODFREY" O.M.I.

From: «*Oblate Missions*», dec. '60, n. 56, page 22.

When I arrived here, Canada was very young. I noticed green fields on the most important street in Winnipeg as well as what is now Granville Street in Vancouver. The picture in my memory reflects just a single street on either side of the railway tracks in Regina as well as Calgary. Right in the heart of Vancouver I remember the upturned roots of lush Pacific woods towering over the bus as it passed over to the Kitsilano townsite. Vancouver had then a population of only 22,000. That was in 1901, and the Canadian wilderness was to be my home for many many years.

But my story starts in quite another world. I was born at Hausen, Franconia, in Bavaria, in the diocese of Wurzburg. My father was Johann Eichelbacher. My mother's maiden name had been Victoria Zengel.

On one occasion, when I was scarcely nine years old, the curate of my home parish turned to us altar boys and asked if we wanted to enter the studies for priesthood. Two other boys, three years older than I, were inclined to accept the offer. And so did I myself. It was always the ambition of us young people and our thoroughly Catholic parents to receive such a call as this.



A new institution had come to the attention of our zealous curate; namely the Juniorate of the Oblate Fathers founded in a rather far away place. However, this did not matter. So there were three of us admitted in October 1887 to the Juniorate at Valkenburg in the Province of Limburg, Holland. I happened to be the youngest admitted — not being ten years old — and was the youngest for many years afterwards.

There I spent the six years on the regular curriculum of studies. The Novitiate was not far away, at St. Gerlach. I pronounced my first vows as an Oblate on September 8th, 1894. I went to the Scholasticate in Liege, Belgium, for the higher studies. There my health seemed to falter and I was sent back to the Juniorate where I taught some courses and tried to regain my strength. On July 16, 1896 I made my Final Vows and was transferred to the new Scholasticate at Huenfeld, Germany. I was ordained in 1900.

I spent another year there and then received my obedience for the northern part of Manitoba. But before leaving for the sea voyage, my obedience was changed and instead I was to go to the far off west — the Yukon Territory! The gold rush had taken place there in '97 and '98. A large population of miners were digging gold there — men from all over Canada, the United States and all the countries of Europe.

I arrived in Dawson on July 17, 1901, and was greeted by one of my early friends, heretofore mentioned, one of the altar boys who had received the call with me in our home parish many years before!

My first obedience was to the parish in Dawson as an assistant. I was given charge of a mining area prevalently French-Canadian. Owing to the fact that I had spent a whole year in the Scholasticate with French Oblate Brothers and my previous studies in



French in the Juniorate, this did not offer any difficulties.

When I first went to visit the miners on the creek, I found only a poor tent erected for the purpose of holding Divine Service. It had seen better days and had begun to tear in every corner under the influence of the wind and snow.

We had to erect a new building for the Divine Service — a log church, as it was the easiest and the least costly to build. The material was close by and so the little log church at the mouth of Last Chance was built and did good service until the population was gone.

Another chapel was built at a place with the rather poetic name of Goldbottom at the confluence of the Goldbottom and Hunker creeks. It served for as long a time as the miners were forking gold from the sand where nature had deposited it in immemorial times.

The elements of nature were raising havoc with another tent church at Bonanza. This large tent, 24 by 40 feet, had done good service on that place which was the richest spot in the Klondyke district. But one morning news reached me that a heavy snowfall during a stormy night had destroyed the whole tent. For some time after that, Mass was celebrated in the upper room over a store. The space was loaned to us by the Catholic manager.

Meanwhile I had plans drawn up by an architect who had tried his luck in goldmining. A very nice plan it was and I tried to carry it out.

But building costs money. I had to experience that. I went from claim to claim pleading my cause. Generally I was received with sympathy and collected the offerings which they gave. On other occasions some people offered me the shovel to earn the funds for myself! Once I appealed to a Swedish miner who happened to be one of the



luckiest men in the district. He answered that he was inclined to help the good work of the Sisters in the hospital, but had decidedly no use for a church!

However, the church was built and it served the mining population for a long time, until the creeks were worked out.

About this time I received an obedience to the southern part of the Yukon, to Whitehorse. A fairly large church had been built there by Father J. C. LEFEBVRE, O.M.I., in 1901.

The little city of Whitehorse was founded during the gold rush of '97 and '98. It was the terminus of the little scenic railway which connected with the port of Skagway 111 miles distant on the Alaska panhandle.

Whitehorse was the beginning of the Yukon river navigation where, in the heydays, an English company operated something like 12 to 15 stern-wheel steamers for the transportation of passengers and supplies for the goldfields of the Klondyke and other mining fields in the northern Territory.

The city had only a limited population of between 400 to 450, most of whom were occupied principally in the summer time on the repair of steamers carrying the passengers from the middle of May to the middle of October. We had a fairly steady population during those months.

In connection with the ministry at Whitehorse I had charge of a little mining camp just across the boundary of British Columbia, the district of Atlin. I managed to visit there twice each summer.

The care of a little tribe of Indians was taken over by my successor, the Rev. JOSEPH ALLARD O.M.I., who was stationed there on a permanent basis and established an Indian school. The Indians of that place were Christianized by the Russian missionaries from the Alaska panhandle, but were later on abandoned by them, probably for lack of



missionary personnel. The Indians belonged to the Tlingit tribe. They all came over in time, under the hard work of the devoted Father Joseph Allard.

In 1907, after a two year stay at Whitehorse, I was called back to Dawson City. We had a hospital there under the direction of the Sisters of St. Ann of Lachine, Quebec. They also taught at the parochial school founded by Father EDMOND GENDREAU O.M.I. in 1900. It was a great consolation to have this school, for it gave a Christian education to the children of the miners and other inhabitants of the Klondyke gold camp. It was established under a proviso of the Act of the North West Territories which allowed that the expenses be paid by the Government.

When the Canadian Government conceived the idea of a new transcontinental railroad across northern Canada, Prince Rupert was chosen as the western terminus and as a future harbour for shipping to the Orient. This immense enterprise drew large numbers of workmen from all over Canada and West were joined in northern British Columbia.

The Catholic Church had Indian missions along the projected road. For the most part they had been visited only once or twice a year from the Mission of Fort St. James on Stuart Lake. So it became necessary to station a priest along the line. The work began in the summer of 1908. In 1910 I was called on to take up some of the mission work along the line.

I left Dawson at the beginning of October by one of the last river boats and arrived in Prince Rupert about two weeks later. The city was just building up. The communication between the different parts of the sprawling city was only by plank roads laid over the muskeg. Houses were placed here and there on a hilly part of the tchimpsian



peninsula. The church was built late in 1908 in a central part. A little priest's house was attached.

After only a few days stay I boarded one of the little Skeena River sternwheelers which served the work camps along the river. If the water would stay high enough I could reach my new mission, at Hagwilghet, 180 miles up river. As it was towards the end of October, I intended to stay over at the big camp midway for All Saints and All Souls days in order to give the crews of three large tunnels a chance for their religious duties.

But immediately after the celebration of the feasts it was announced that the boat I was on could not proceed up the river to my destination, a distance of about a hundred miles.... Alas...

There was nothing for me to do but pack the most necessary things; mass wine, clothing, and to walk the small paths through the woods beside the river with my pack of about 50 or 60 pounds. Thus I passed from camp to camp. Fortunately I was relieved of my pack on meeting a friend who had some goods shipped in a dugout by a crew of Indians who made a little room for my baggage -- really a good friend in need. It took me three days to walk the remaining distance, stopping in the camps at night, where I met some very friendly and charitable people.

I arrived at the mission station on November 7th and was made welcome by the Chief and the people. This was going to be my home for a long time to come. The Indians belonged to the Théné tribe. They were scattered from the mouth of the Bulkley River eastward along that river to Moricetown, then to Telkwa, Houston, Burns and Fraser lakes and northward from the rail line to Tatla lake and Bear lake.

At my station the regular mission exercises were given twice a year, at Christmas and in the sum-



mer. These misisions were followed very assiduously and settled many difficulties.

We followed a definite program during the rest of the year. In the morning the whole congregation joined in morning prayer and followed the Mass. In the evening they assembled again for night prayer in common. This program gave the priest a chance for instruction whenever there was a need. Abstinence from alcoholic beverages was fully practised and enforced by the Chief and his Council. This preserved the little community from many disorders.

I felt the necessity of schooling for the children. The old church which was built by the first missionaries was still standing unused. We added a ceiling and a few hand made benches and were ready to receive about twenty-five children. I carried on the teaching until it became too onerous for me on account of the ministry and travelling which kept me from the school. However, it was a beginning. I was able to secure the help of a middleaged man who had had a good education in England. A house was built for him, his wife and one daughter and so the school was carried on for many years after.

There was a settlement in Moricetown. We set to work, each according to his capacity, collected what we could and built the church on Moricetown reserve. It measured 26 by 60 feet and was flanked by a neat tower. We had to have a bell, and so made use of the general meeting of the tribe to collect the necessary funds. At our Christmas meeting we were able to collect \$450., the bell was installed and the church blessed. It is a credit to the Indian band at Moricetown.

Homesteads in the Bulkley Valley were taken up after 1904. A little place called Telkwa, at the confluence of the Bulkley and Telkwa rivers seemed like a future centre. In 1912 a little church, 20



by 36 feet, was built there for the settlers and for some Indian families. Owing to its proximity to Hagwuilghet (New Hazelton), Mass could be said regularly on one Sunday each month. Horseback was the means of transportation, and when the roads became a little better, a little gig — a two wheeled carriage that enabled me to stay wherever I wanted. It took me two days going and two days returning.

When the building of the G. T. P. (now the C.N.R.) was nearing completion, it was announced that a place 227 miles east of Prince Rupert would be the location of the first passenger divisional point. This is the town of Smithers. It was a swampy place, but crews of men set to work to clear the future townsite. Station and roundhouses for the locomotives were erected.

This meant naturally, that a little town was in prospect. To accommodate the Catholic population I had to think about a church. In the meantime I had to look for a place for Sunday Service. This was achieved by saying Mass in a store of any place where it was feasible to assemble a small crowd.

It was hard to gather the money for the construction of a church as everybody was building for themselves. Through the generosity of a brother priest Father Nicholas COCCOLA, O.M.I., who came to my help with a thousand dollar cheque (alms of his mission, mostly Indian), I was able to bring the building to a finish. It was blessed on the feast of the Patronage of St. Joseph in May, 1914. It has been sufficient for the congregation until now. Now a new church or an enlargement of the old church is needed. In view of the changed conditions of the present time, the building of a new house of worship would entail a very large sum of money — probably ten times the original price of 1914.



In 1921 I enjoyed the privilege of a vacation in my own home country... after twenty years work in the wilderness of western Canada.

On my return I obeyed a call to work on the Pacific coast. I was stationed at the mill and paper town of Ocean Falls with missions at Swanson Bay and Princess Royal Island.

On being called back to Prince Rupert in 1925, I attended to the parish of the town and the adjoining mission of Queen Charlotte Islands, to Stewart and other places.

In 1927 the Bishop called me back to the interior to resume my work there. It was the routine work formerly practised among the itinerant missionaries — visits at regular times, Christmas, New Year, end of Lent and Easter and then in June or July, with mission exercises now and then.

Father Joseph ALLARD O.M.I., who had entered this mission field, had built a church at the old fort on Babine Lake for the Indian community living there. This was finished and dedicated in 1933.

Another mission post was at Tatla Lake, sixty miles across the mountains northeast of Babine Lake. I set to work and built, with the native population, a church sufficient for them. It was 30 by 60 feet with a little house for the priest nearby. From that place the priest visited the old mission at Fort Connolly, or Bear Lake. Transportation was, in those days, by shank's mare or horseback a distance of about 100 miles northwest of Tatla Lake. We had there only a relatively small population of between seventy and one hundred souls.

In the mission field around Smithers which I attended to, it became necessary to build another church at a station along the C.N.R. called Houston. It was a name taken from a newspaperman in Prince Rupert at the time when names were selected for



the various stations along the railroad. It is not connected with the Houston in Texas! I set to work and a suitable place for the Catholic people of the place and adjoining district was prepared.

All these efforts were made in order to keep the Faith alive. Under the conditions of the present times — radio, newspaper, magazines (and T.V. Father Godfrey! Ed.), the Faith is liable to suffer and the average man become unattentive to the spiritual values of life and eventually lapse into a modern heathen.

When new men came into the field — younger men — I took over the little post of chaplain of the Sacred Heart Hospital, at Smithers, or, in legal terms The Bulkley Valley District Hospital. This hospital, founded in 1933-34, was entrusted to the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Ann of Lachine, near Montreal. They are the same who have charge of St. Mary's Hospital in Dawson City and St. Joseph's Hospital, Victoria.

When the old Pioneer missionary Father COCOLA O.M.I. died, I took over from him at the hospital and, to my great astonishment, am still here!

I celebrated my Golden Jubilee as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate in 1946; the Golden Jubilee of my priestly ordination in 1950 and recently the Diamond Jubilee of priesthood on May 24th.

My everlasting thanks to the infinite Goodness and Providence of God. For He has been with me, *« in journeying often, in perils of waters, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea... »*.

To Him be all honour and glory.